DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 197 096 CE 027 652

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TITLE Case Studies--Their Use in Determining Factors Influencing Job Placement.
PUB DATE 8 Dec 80
NOTE 14p.: For related documents see CE 027 233 and CE 027 241. Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Conference (New Orleans, LA, December 8, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies; Economic Factors; Educational Research; Evaluation Methods; *Influences; *Job Placement; Postsecondary Education; Research Design; *Research Methodology; Secondary Education; Social Influences; *Vocational Education

ABSTRACT

The project Factors Affecting Job Placement in Vocational Education used case study methodology to determine factors that can be used in determining policy and in making decisions to improve vocational education at federal, state, and local levels. Case studies were chosen as the research methodology because there was a need for a detailed description of the job placement process, because case studies would allow for determining major themes or issues surrounding job placement, and because case studies allowed for the accumulation of a collage of information unimportant in itself but adding to understanding of job placement. Strategies involved in the study of twelve local education sites and eleven state agency sites included setting boundaries, site selection, establishing initial contacts, data collection procedures, organizing data, staff training, field work logistics, and analyzing data. Staff experiences resulted in the observations that case studies (1) yield enormous amounts of detailed information about the natural environment, (2) are expensive, (3) are time consuming, (4) require trained staff, (5) are attacked by proponents of qualitative data, (6) have very limited generalizability, and (7) result in long reports. (YLB)

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CASE STUDIES - THEIR USE IN DETERMINING FACTORS INFLUENCING JOB PLACEMENT

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CE027652

A Paper Presented as Part of the
Symposium on Case Studies - Their Use
in Evaluating Vocation Education
American Vocational Association Annual Convention
New Orleans, Louisiana

December 8, 1980

CASE STUDIES: THEIR USE IN DETERMINING FACTORS INFLUENCING JOB PLACEMENT

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to briefly describe a project which used case study methodology and to indicate some of the benefits and limitations of using case studies.

The Project

The project, "Factors Affecting Job Placement in Vocational Education" was one of the projects funded by the U.S. Education Department through the National Center for Research in Vocational Education. The purpose of the project was to determine those factors influencing job placement that can be used in determining policy and in making decisions to improve vocational education at the federal, state, and local levels. The objectives of the project were:

- To identify factors relating positively or negatively to the placement of former secondary and postsecondary vocational education students in jobs related to their training.
- To provide a detailed description of the educational and community processes which appear to influence former secondary and postsecondary vocational education students being placed in jobs related to their training.
- To generate hypotheses concerning variables relating to the placement of former secondary and postsecondary vocational education students in jobs related to their training.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable for the study was the percentage of former vocational education students from a local education agency employed in a field related to their training. In most states this information is reported by local education agencies to state education agencies. In some states the information is obtained through statewide follow-up of former students.

Project Methodology

Several methodologies have been used to achieve the project objectives. Following is a brief summary of the research methodology.

- An analysis of existing data concerning educational, social, and economic factors in all fifty states with a more detailed analysis of data in 584 local education agencies in seven states.

- Questionnaires were prepared to send to approximatel 25,000 respondents in seventy-two local secondary education sites located in the aforementioned seven states and thirty-two local postsecondary education sites located in four additional states.

- A comprehensive review of the literature was conducted.

- Case studies were conducted in eight local secondary education sites and in four local postsecondary education sites. The case study sites also served as questionnaire sites. It should be noted that the case studies were not an attempt to evaluate the vocational education programs. As used in this study they provided a thick descriptive picture of the situation, especially concerning the job placement of former vocational education students.

The final report of the study is due June 31, 1981. The findings of the study will reflect the data collected from all phases of the study.

The remainder of the paper deals with the case study portion of the project.

Why Case Studies?

The review of the literature suggested that vocational educators frequently have rather limited understanding of the complex processes surrounding job placement. There appeared to be a need to add to the existing experience and understanding of the job placement process. Case studies have "been tried and found to be a direct and satisfying way of adding to experience and improving understanding" (Stake, 1978).

It is not the intent of this paper to reconstruct the qualitative/quantitative debate. However, there are many in the vocational education research community who believe that research is a form of inquiry whose meaningful results can only be noted in numbers. The "ultimate" for many is to see how far one can carry the decimal point. It is not a question of qualitative or quantitative. Rather, it is a question of which research methodology or combination of methodologies will provide information most useful to those who can bring about an improvement of the program.

As we considered the methodologies needed to achieve the study objectives it became increasingly clear that there was a need for a thick and rich description of the job placement process. The case studies would allow us to determine major themes or issues surrounding the job placement process. In addition, the case studies would allow us to pull together, through the basic themes or issues, the collage of information that appears to be unimportant in itself, but would add very much to our understanding of the job placement process. The case studies provided the opportunity to understand human behavior from the frame of reference of those most involved in the job placement process. (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975).

Conducting the Case Studies

In this section of the paper strategies used to conduct the study and some of the successes and problems encountered in the study will be noted.

Setting Boundaries. Several boundaries were established for the case studies. Most important was the fact that the case studies were seeking information about those factors affecting job placement. Many schools and many teachers espouse additional objectives for vocational education. This study centered on job placement. Even though the study centered on job placement, it does not take much imagination to realize that job placement is a very "broad and deep" area to study. The factors affecting job placement may be endless. Therefore, the case studies focused on the educational factors affecting job placement. Other factors such as economic and community involvement were considered, but most of the effort centered around the educational factors.

The study staff wanted to deal mostly with those factors which could be manipulated by vocational educators. Since most of manipulable factors are in the educational area, it made sense to spend most of the time in the educational area.

Because of limited resources, only one school building in a local system was studied.

Only those secondary school systems with five or more vocational education programs were included in the study.

An attempt was made to study individuals who were affected by the vocational education program and those who influenced the program through administrative or other involvement. This included principals, superintendents, deans, vocational education directors, teachers, counselors, placement specialists, current students, former students, advisory committee members, employers, and civic leaders. In addition, the interviewers were free to follow other leads once they were on-site.

Because of the potential importance of state rules and regulations impacting upon job placement rates, we interviewed selected individuals at the state level and collected relevant state documents.

Unit of Analysis. The unit of analysis was the school system. The study was seeking factors affecting job placement in different environments. In addition, system-wide policies on vocational education seem to impact fairly even across individual schools within a system.

Site Selection. Purposeful sampling was used in selecting the states and the local sites in the participating states. The study staff purposely sought sites with high and low job placement rates. In addition, we sought sites with high and low unemployment rates and sites located in metro and non-metro areas. At least one inter-city site was selected. Since we did not have the power to impose ourselves on the case study hosts we obviously went only where we were welcomed. However, it should be noted that no site refused to be a case study site. Several sites have refused to participate in the questionnaire phase of the study.

Establishing Initial Contacts. Our initial contacts were made with the state director of vocational education. Once the state had agreed to participate we asked that a member of the state staff be designated as liaison person for the study. When we had selected local sites, the contact and request to participate in the study was made by the state liaison person to the local school chief administrator. When the chief administrator had agreed to participate we asked that he/she designate a local liaison person.

All initial written contacts made by our staff were accompanied by a brief overview of the study. This overview helped to alleviate initial fears about the study. All of our contact individuals were provided assurances of confidentiality in regard to site and individual identification.

A member of our staff made a pre-site visit of two to three days to explain the study, to establish initial interview schedules, and to collect relevant documents and data about the site.

The on-site case study was conducted by two staff members. Each staff member spent twenty days on-site. The state level interviews were conducted by one staff member and averaged two days in length.

Data Collection Procedures. The data collection procedures used included observation, interviews, and review of documents. Groups initially interviewed at each site were identified in the preceeding section "Setting Boundries".

Organizing Data. In the case studies of secondary vocational education sites we used an elaborate data coding system. We did not tape record the interviews. In the case studies of the postsecondary vocational education sites the interviews were tape recorded and the coding scheme was much less elaborate in detail. In both systems it was possible to retrieve data by site, interviewee, program area and interviewer. In addition, the data was record-d by substantive areas such as, placement process, curriculum development, program philosophy, use of citizen advisory committee, etc.

Staff Training. Very few members of our staff were trained in the techniques of conducting case studies. We selected a local school and spent four days at the stie training the staff in the correct procedures to use. This also served as a pilot test of our procedures.

Field Work Logistics. Most of our interviews were scheduled in advance with the prospective interviewee aware in very general terms of the purpose of the interview. The initial interviewees were selected with the assistance of the local liaison person. Subsequent interviewees were usually selected by the interviewer.

Interviewees were always asked if they objected to having notes taken or to having the interview recorded. Nearly all interviews were conducted on an individual basis. In a few instances small group interviews were conducted with current students.

We attempted to keep the number of interviews to three per day. If the actual interview averaged one hour, this allowed about half of the day to write the interviews and to review relevant documents.

Analyzing Data. The data analysis began in the field. As the interviewers collected data certain themes or issues began to emerge. The emerging themes assisted interviewers as they continued their search for additional information.

Brief summaries were provided each local site. The summary report of all sites was written along major themes emerging from the data.

Study Findings

The findings are preliminary and may change in subsequent analysis. The following impressions concern only those factors which can be manipulated by vocational educators. From a preliminary analysis of the data, it appears that job placement rates for former vocational education students are higher when:

- School administrators have an education philosophy that recognizes and encourages the importance of job placement.
- The total school staff reveals an attitude to the students that clearly recognizes the importance of vocational education.
- Citizens in the community have an active role in planning and evaluating programs of vocational education.
- Cooperative education programs are well organized and used.
- The prevailing community expectations are that vocational education in the public school system provides individuals with skills that are needed by the community if it is to prosper.
- The school staff has a positive attitude about the importance of job placement. A positive attitude toward job placement appears to be more important than the installation of a particular job placement model.
- Teachers have the major responsibility for job placement.
- The curriculum is closely related to employer needs.
- Teachers have had recent work experience in the field related to what they are teaching.
- Program and teacher evaluations include consideration of job placement rates.
- Effective use is made of labor market information in planning vocational education programs.

General Comments

Staff experiences in conducting case studies in twelve local education sites and eleven state agency sites in this study and other case studies in which staff members have been involved contributed to the following observations about case studies.

- Case Studies yield enormous amounts of thick, rich, and detailed information about the natural environment.
- Case studies are expensive. This varies considerably with the complexity of the problem being studied, but travel, lodging and meals for staff on site requires substantial funds. However, in comparing methods one should not overlook the enormous time and money involved in conducting mail surveys.
- Case studies, as many other methods, are time consuming. One must consider the political realities of when the information is needed.
- In many situations trained staff are not available to conduct case studies. Teacher educators need to take serious note of this shortcoming in graduate education programs.
- One must be prepared for constant attacks from those who trust only quantitative data.
- Case studies have very limited generalizability, as do most of the studies conducted in vocational education.
- With some study problems it may be difficult to decide on the unit of analysis. In this study we assumed there would be much commonality among the vocational education programs concerning job placement processes. We found considerable variability among programs and among teachers.
- Securing the participation of state and local sites for the case studies was relatively easy. However, several sites have refused to participate in the questionnaire phase of the study.
- Interviews should be tape recorded. The most powerful information comes from some of the quotes provided by interviewees. Unless these are on tape they are often lost.
- The data coding system shold be simple yet enable one to retrieve the information.
- When several sites are involved it is better to have very few interviewers who can be at all sites. Where this is not possible every effort must be made to reduce interviewer bias.

- Data analysis should begin with the first data collected. This continuing analysis permits verification of data and allows themes or issues to emerge.

- Case study reports, because of their narrative style, tend to be long. Summaries tend to lose the thickness and richness of the data. Researchers need to find better ways of reporting case study data.

- Interviewees are eager to tell their story. While one must always be on guard for incorrect information, participant eagerness in the research process is most encouraging.

- For the problems we have studied we have found a mixture of structured and open-ended interviewing to yield the best results. Some common-core general areas of inquiry were helpful. However, the interviews were generally started in an unstructured manner and if this resulted in obtaining desired information, they were allowed to coninue without structured questions.

Conclusion

The case study is a legitimate research method. No method has all the correct procedures for all research problems. The research problem should be analyzed carefully and the best research method selected to achieve the study objectives.

For many research and evaluation efforts the optimal methodology will be a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, the researcher/evaluator must remember that "these approaches represent fundamentally different epistemological frameworks for conceptualizing the nature of knowing, social reality, and procedures for comprehending these phenomena" (Cook and Reichardt, 1979). The challenge is to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods resulting in a deeper, thicker, and richer understanding of reality with generalizability of these understandings to the wider community.

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